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ABSTRACT

The policy statement by the American Foundation for the Blind deals with services for children and adults who have physical or mental handicaps in addition to visual loss. Noted are difficulties in providing appropriate services to the multiply handicapped. It is stated that optimum independence should be the goal of services for the multiply handicapped; that comprehensive services should include medical, social, educational, and vocational assistance; and that schools and agencies across the country should cooperate in providing adequate diagnostic and treatment services for the multiply handicapped. (DB)

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Policy Statement

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BACKGROUND

Advances in medical diagnosis and treatment and a growing public concern for the welfare of all our citizens have, during the past 20 years, created a new understanding of the potential as well as the special problems of children and adults who are multiply handicapped.

During the centuries, when mentally and physically handicapped people were either abandoned to die, committed to institutions, or treated as village beggars or curiosities, neither a real understanding of the handicaps nor a concern for the normal human aspirations of individuals were possible or considered necessary. The achieving of a national social conscience; rapid advances in medical diagnosis and treatment and development of standards and techniques relating to teaching and rehabilitation, have produced an unprecedented growth in all areas of work with handicapped people.

It is within this generation that educational procedures for the cerebral palsied, the emotionally disturbed, the brain injured, and the perceptually handicapped, have been introduced. The education of visually handicapped, hearing handicapped, and mentally retarded persons has a somewhat longer history. However, the practices, even in these older areas have undergone radical changes. As an example of the combined effects of medical, pedagogical, and social advances, the concept of maximum use of residual vision has revolutionized both the teaching and rehabilitation of severely visually handicapped persons. As a result of medical recommendations regarding maximum use of vision, many persons with severe visual loss no longer regard themselves as being handicapped. Consequently, visually impaired students receive education which is equal to that of their sighted peers, special orientation and mobility training is provided to enable safe and independent mobility, and new vocational opportunities have opened for those who have a conviction that they can achieve economic independence. These advances in information and public attitude have resulted in heightened concern for children and adults who have more than one physical or mental handicap.

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The field of special education is now undergoing the inevitable growing pains of developing attitudes and techniques which will meet the personal, educational, and social needs of multiply handicapped people. It is relatively easy to diagnose and provide services to children and adults who have severe visual loss. It is, however, much more difficult to evaluate and plan for those who have additional severe physical or mental handicaps, and there is a reluctance on the part of each field of special education to provide service to individuals whose combined problems make present day methods and techniques seem inadequate. We are in the position, therefore, of being acutely aware of the problems and needs without being quite able to fill the existing gaps. Since each multiply handicapped person must have highly individualized services, one of the most evident aspects of the service lag is lack of adequate numbers of professionally trained personnel. Other serious lacks are related to educational methods and techniques, equipment and materials, and adequate national, state and regional planning for facilities and services.

Medical advances which have resulted in the saving of lives at both ends of the life span have inevitably enlarged the number of multiply handicapped persons. Infants who would have died at birth, persons of all ages who would have succumbed to accident and disease, and the aging are being saved through medical intervention. Thus, while there are no accurate statistics regarding numbers of multiply handicapped persons, schools and agencies are increasingly aware of requests for services. The growth of these requests is undoubtedly also related to more sophisticated diagnostic and evaluation procedures and to a growing determination on the part of handicapped persons to seek services which will enable them to lead more independent lives.

One of the unresolved problems in this area relates to terminology or definition. As the term multiply handicapped is here used, it applies to those persons who have a visual loss and one or more additional mental or physical impairments which have handicapping effects on the individual's personal, educational, vocational, or social activities.

POLICY

While the American Foundation for the Blind recognizes that certain multiply handicapped persons will never achieve personal or economic independence, we do believe

that others can and will. We recognize also that it is important to define independence in terms of each individual's handicapping conditions. Thus, while a cerebral palsied blind or otherwise visually impaired person may never be independently mobile, he may well be able to achieve personal, social and vocational self-direction, after the problems of his movement and transportation have been recognized and met. Handicaps may result in dependence for certain types of assistance without creating a dependent personality.

The American Foundation for the Blind believes that comprehensive services to multiply handicapped children and adults should include medical, social, educational, vocational and avocational assistance by qualified personnel, should be available to all age ranges on the basis of individual evaluation and re-evaluation, should be extended to all socio-economic levels and to persons in all parts of the country. Each individual must be afforded opportunity to achieve his maximum potential and to assist in making plans and decisions for his own present and future well being.

The American Foundation for the Blind believes that it is imperative that schools and agencies undertake cooperative planning for the development of adequate diagnostic, treatment, educational, and rehabilitation facilities in feasible local, state, and regional areas across the country, so that geographical location will not be a determinant in planning for visually handicapped persons who have other handicaps. The American Foundation for the Blind further believes that there is a pressing need for increased public and voluntary support of relevant research and experimentation.

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